Cricket playing father gets murdered in the Bronx. Daughter experiences racism in NYC schools from teachers, but goes on to found a credit union.

VERA CLARK IFILL

DP-28
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BIRTH DATE: MAY 4, 1914
INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 23, 1989
RUNNING TIME: 1:10:00
INTERVIEWER: ANDREW PHILLIPS
RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN
INTERVIEW LOCATION: LOS ANGELES, CA
TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1989
TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1995

BARBADOS, 1921
AGE 7
PASSAGE ON THE "VESTRIS"

PHILLIPS: This is interview number 402 [DP-28]. This is Andrew Phillips, and I'm speaking with Vera Clark, Ifill?

IFILL: Ifill.

PHILLIPS: Ifill. I-F-I-L-L.

IFILL: Like the Eiffel Tower.

PHILLIPS: Like the Eiffel Tower. It's Tuesday the 23rd of March [sic] 1989.

IFILL: March?

PHILLIPS: May, I'm sorry. May. We're beginning this interview at twenty past six in her home, and she immigrated from Barbados. And I'm just going to fix the microphone up before we start. What year did you immigrate?

IFILL: 1921.

PHILLIPS: Okay. I'm just going to move that microphone. (break in tape) January of 1921. All right. Can you tell us first what town you were born in and, when you do mention those things, if the spelling is not completely obvious, would you include that?

IFILL: Okay. It was the Parish of St. Patrick, Upper Christ Church, Barbados.

PHILLIPS: What year?

IFILL: Oh, May 4, 1914.

PHILLIPS: Tell us what your parents did, what did they do for a living in Barbados.

IFILL: Well, when I was born, my mother had, and my father had already immigrated to the United States. And my mother was pregnant with me and she came home to Barbados, and I was born there. My father was, uh, had studied to be a carpenter with my grandfather, as far as I know and, uh, this was, they came to America about 1904, 1905 and it was almost impossible to find any kind of work that was in, you know, for black people at that time, so whatever jobs were available that's what my parents did.

PHILLIPS: Why did they leave Barbados?

IFILL: Well, if you know Barbados, you wouldn't ask that question. It's a very small island, it's about twelve miles square, a hundred and forty-four square miles. It's densely populated, and it has one of the highest rate of, uh, literacy in the world, so there is no place to go but out, once you have reached maturity.

PHILLIPS: What did your family traditionally do there? What kind of work were they . . .

IFILL: Well, my grand . . . My mother's father was a carpenter and, uh, that was the work that he did. He worked on the plantations, or the, around in the area, doing carpentry work.

PHILLIPS: What sort of plantation?

IFILL: Well, what they call the sugar plantations, you know, where they made the, had the sugar cane and that sort of thing.

PHILLIPS: When you were in Barbados, I think you left when you were how old, to come to the United States?

IFILL: About six-and-a-half, almost seven.

PHILLIPS: So during those six years, give us a sense of your life and times.

IFILL: Well, they told me, my mother told me that when I was born I was very sickly, and that my grandfather who was a carpenter had built my coffin because they didn't expect me to live. And I can remember the first five or six years of my life always being sick. I had all sorts of everything that was going around, and it wasn't, from that standpoint, it wasn't very happy a childhood for me. I started school a little bit later than most of the children because of my being so frail, and I hadn't attended school I don't know how long, but it wasn't very long. Even thought it was supposed to be a public education, you still had to pay. And since we were not only myself but there was my two sisters and y cousin and my nephew, I think, later. My grandparents did not always have the money to pay for our schooling, so I would go, not constantly, but whenever they could find the money to send me.

PHILLIPS: What was, what was it like living in Barbados in these days?

IFILL: Well, as far as I can remember, my grandfather would go to work and my grandmother would look after us children and, um, it was, my grandfather not only was, uh, a carpenter, but he also liked to grow things. And we lived on one quarter of an acre. From one end of the street to the other, my mother's maiden name was Sobrice and from one end of one street to the other there were Sobrice. They were

all cousins, all related, and there must have been about nine to ten houses, and they were all Sobrice. But unfortunately they didn't get all along. (she laughs) And, um, but my grandfather would work and come home and he would plow up the acreage, and he would be growing different things, all kinds of fruits and vegetables, and he also rendered another, two other spots, where he grew sugar cane and other things. So we always had, uh, plenty of things that was growing that we could, um, use for our daily needs. And it wasn't very often that we would have to go to the store to get things. And, um, it was, the store was a place where we called the Four Cross, which was where, four schools, I mean four roads, met. And it was there that there were schools. I mean, not schools, stores. The school was about, um, I'd say about a quarter of a mile up the road from where our house was, and it sat on a hill. And, um, you, when you went to the school, if you were late, the mistress would be there and she would, you'd hold out your hands and she'd give you a couple of slaps on your hands for being late, or not being on time. And it was one large schoolroom with about four or five different classes in that one room, all learning at one time. And, um, when I revisited Barbados in 1977, the school was still there.

PHILLIPS: This was, who was, Barbados was a colony of which country?

IFILL: England.

PHILLIPS: And when did it become independent?

IFILL: It became independent, I think, in 1964 or something. I'm not positive now.

PHILLIPS: So when you were a little girl there, of course, the British were the colonial . . .

IFILL: Masters.

PHILLIPS: . . . masters. And was your schoolteacher British?

IFILL: No. He was a local.

PHILLIPS: But there was a British system of schooling.

IFILL: Right, and the British way of doing things, like apprenticeship, and that sort of thing.

PHILLIPS: What do you remember about that side of life in Barbados?

IFILL: Oh, what I remember was the, um, the distinction between the British, the white British and the blacks. There was this "touch-me-not" sort of thing. I remember that on one occasion this, the, um, the church, St. Patrick's church was not too far from our house, and that's where we went on Sunday for, uh, meetings and in the week times. And the first music that I can remember is church music. And I can recognize that same hymn today. And I remember on one occasion that there was a visiting, uh, church dignitary. They would always have this, a gathering. And it was as though you were dealing in two different worlds because the, um, the blacks were sort of like untouchables, and we, as blacks, felt just the opposite. We felt that we were superior. So it was rather a mixture of, uh, the bewilderment to me as a child, not to be able to understand why there was that distinction.

PHILLIPS: Did your parents or your grandparents or your family, your parents weren't there, but your grandparents and the people, the elders, the older people who you were in touch with as a child, did they talk about that much?

IFILL: No, it was just that they, we had a slang word. I later learned in life that it was an African word. We would call them Poor Backra Misses, and it . . .

PHILLIPS: Say that again?

IFILL: Poor Backra Misses.

PHILLIPS: How do you spell it?

IFILL: I don't know. It's an African word.

PHILLIPS: Poor Backra.

IFILL: Uh-huh. And this particular white lady in the village . . . Incidentally, in Barbados, there is a particular colony of Scottish people who came over to Barbados in the early times, and they had never really left, and they're off to the side, and they usually call them "red legs." So there was that feeling of, on our part, of that, you know, disdain. I don't know why, but that was it. Yet, at the same time, the people who owned and lived on the plantation, they kept themselves aloof from the average black individual, or natives, or whatever you want to call them. But one thing, we all had the same accent. (she laughs)

PHILLIPS: Which you don't have so much of . . .

IFILL: No, I've lost it. (she laughs)

PHILLIPS: What about your life as a little girl? Was it a happy life? Did you . . .

IFILL: Well, for as far as I know that I could think of it was but, as I said, I was very sickly. I was always ill and, uh, that was sort of like, it put me in the category that I couldn't do all the things the other children would do, because I was always sick.

PHILLIPS: What kind of house did you live in? What were the conditions like?

IFILL: Well, it was a house that my mother told me my grandfather had built. And it was, um, it had a lean-to in the back for the kitchen, which my grandmother didn't use very often, and it had another little area. And then it had another large room, and it had another bedroom. Then it had a veranda going all around it. And, um, that's about the way my memory of it is. And then it was a big breadfruit in the yard and, um, a big papaya tree, and a tamarind tree in the back, and different other fruit trees.

PHILLIPS: Did your grandparents used to tell you stories about their life?

IFILL: No. They used to tell us what we call, uh, ghost stories. (she laughs) Guppy stories, as they'd call them.

PHILLIPS: What sort of stories?

IFILL: Guppy.

PHILLIPS: Can you remember any of those stories?

IFILL: (she laughs) I don't want to. It took me a long time to realize that what those stories were really, what they would more or less say, you know, superstitious. And by the time they get finished telling you those stories at night you didn't want to go to bed, you were afraid. So I always had the feeling that I'll die soon as the sun went down because of the recalling of these stories that they told. They weren't very pleasant. They were very, you know, they were supernatural things.

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PHILLIPS: Why do you think they told those stories?

IFILL: I don't know. Maybe it was the, not understanding the Bible, really, and maybe a hold over from the African days, and whatnot. I don't know.

PHILLIPS: Did they ever talk much about their roots? Could I ask you, if you would be so kind as to try and not touch the cable . . .

IFILL: I forgot about that.

PHILLIPS: That's all right. Did you hear much about the roots, your roots, African stories, anything about that?

IFILL: Well, the most amazing thing was that there was still some of the older people in the village that were speaking what they would call Creole-English that I at least learned that that's what they would call it. And, um, about 1982 I visited Sierra Leone and I found out that languages that I had heard as a child was the same language that they were speaking in Sierra Leone. And then when I learned about the history that some of the, uh, Sierra Leones had gone back to Barbados. It was, went back to slavery time, and had settled there, and then some of them had come back. So that was very unusual.

PHILLIPS: Went back to what time?

IFILL: To slavery times.

PHILLIPS: Oh, slavery time, right.

IFILL: When they had, uh, taken a group of, um, slaves from, I think it was Canada, Nova Scotia, wherever it was, and had brought them into Sierra Leone. That's why the city, the main city, is called Freetown, because that's where they land. And then later on some of them went to Barbados, and then some of them come back. So it was rather amazing to me that I could trace some of that early history in my head of the language, was something that I had heard as a child. At that time I had no idea where Sierra Leone was. And I also found out that, I ran into someone who happened to be, which we think we are related, who was someone who had been to Barbados, had come back, and found out that was a relation of my mother.

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PHILLIPS: And did your grandparents actually speak about the experience of slavery in Barbados?

IFILL: I don't know. I don't think slavery was at their time.

PHILLIPS: But they, I wondered if they talked about it from their own parents' time.

IFILL: No, no. Never.

PHILLIPS: What about the religious life? What was that like?

IFILL: Church of England, Episcopalian. One step removed from the Catholic Church. That was the religion.

PHILLIPS: Was the minister white or was he a black person?

IFILL: White. White, and the, um, the choirboys were native blacks and whatnot, but the minister was white. They always sent them out from England.

PHILLIPS: Did you enjoy church?

IFILL: Well, I enjoyed the music. I didn't clearly understand the religious understanding of the Bible, but I knew that there was something wrong, but I didn't know what it was. And, um, the indoctrination of heaven and hell and the devil and all that sort of thing was, to me, was very scary as a child. And, not thoroughly understanding what the bible was all about, it wasn't until later years that I came to a better understanding of the bible.

PHILLIPS: Did you hear much about the outside world, much about a when you were living in Barbados?

IFILL: Well, we did because my mother and father was there, so my grandparents would mention, you know, that your parents is in America, or something like that.

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PHILLIPS: Was that common for parents to leave their children back at home in Barbados and travel to America or elsewhere?

IFILL: Well, my sisters, they were born in America. They were not born there. My mother had taken them home when she came home with me, because of the economical, the economic situation it's not that easy in a foreign country. And, especially because World War One, for a black person to be able to get a decent job, and even decent housing. So it was easier for the parents to send the children back to their grandparents, and it would give them a better chance for them to make a way for themselves and maybe help with the children later.

PHILLIPS: Is that, were there other families that did that as well?

IFILL: I think so, because it's still common today. People still do those things today. They send the children home.

PHILLIPS: And do they then, whey do they do that?

IFILL: For different reasons. In some cases they may do it because, like I say, for the question of finances. In some cases they may feel that the children may get a better education. Because under the British system the education was better. It still is. And, um, it was, you know, various different reasons, sometimes the health of the child.

PHILLIPS: Can you talk just a little bit more about that colonial experience, the system of law and the system of the courts and the education system. And, of course, that was all a British-imposed system on your culture, wasn't it?

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IFILL: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: Did the, I mean, what did people feel about that? Did they . . .

IFILL: Well, I don't know about today, but I do know that Barbados had the reputation of being the, uh, the England of the Caribbeans because they were, they had their own self-government. They were one of the few colonial outposts that had their own Parliament and elected their own officers. And they were only ruled over by the, uh, by the, what they call them, a general attorney? I don't know the title, but they sent out from England, but they had their own, their own Parliament, their own House, and they made their own laws. So the, in the system of the police, the uniforms, and the whole thing was British and the houses, the fences, the low fences and whatnot, brick walls. Low, narrow alleys, streets. Just like England. (she laughs) No different. Different was the climate.

PHILLIPS: Did the, did the people, I mean, did you come to learn later, perhaps you were too young at the time, but did you come to learn later what people felt about that? Did they dislike, intentionally, being colonized? Did they talk about that experience? Did they . . .

IFILL: No, because England had given the islands there independence long before America gave its slaves its independence. So by that time, by the time I was born, they must have been free for nearly what, fifty years or more.

PHILLIPS: Who was free?

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IFILL: The islands was free. They went back to, um, to Wilbur Force time and whatnot. I don't know if you're familiar with that history. And, so, by the time I came along nobody was talking about that, as I can remember, and I was just a youngster anyway.

PHILLIPS: You're talking about the freeing of slavery.

IFILL: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: The two things, there's the freeing of slavery, and then political independence for the country of Barbados. That came much later.

IFILL: Much come later.

PHILLIPS: You're talking, William Wilbur Force, he freed the slaves.

IFILL: Right. Wilbur Force. But what I'm trying to say is Barbados always had its own internal government. It was not ruled like the other islands. It had its own Parliament, its own House and so forth and so on, and it was a model for all the other islands in that respect. So, therefore, though they were part of the British

empire, yet they had a certain independence that they enjoyed which the other islands did not enjoy. So there was a difference.

PHILLIPS: So it sounds to me like the people were not unhappy in that colonial situation.

IFILL: I wouldn't know that. I wouldn't know. I know my husband was. I'm sorry he isn't here to tell you his experiences. He was.

PHILLIPS: Maybe you can share a bit of that with us.

IFILL: Well . . .

PHILLIPS: Perhaps you should tell us his name.

IFILL: (she laughs) Well, his name was Alan McDonnell Ifill, and he was born in St. George, and Wattsville is St. George, St. Michael. And his experience was very unhappy because he did not like the idea of the colonialism, he didn't like the idea of the fact that, as he would say, "The difference that was made between the whites and the blacks." And that if, even though, if a minister of the church would consider himself too proud to come to your home and sit down and have a meal or something of that nature, he would consider himself above it. And he felt that, um, the whole system was wrong. He didn't like the ideas of titles and that sort of thing. So he was apprenticed out as a youngster to be a printer, and when he got the opportunity he left, and I think he was about fourteen or fifteen, and he went to, uh, Panama, then from Panama he came to the United States. But, um, he felt that the whole system was wrong. That was his way, his thinking of it.

PHILLIPS: So you decided, or your, because your family, your mother and father were living in the United States, at a certain point it was decided that you would go to the United States.

IFILL: What happened was first my grandfather died, and then my grandmother, so then there was no one there to take care of us that would have been responsible for us. It was myself and my two sisters, and a nephew and a cousin. And, um, so my mother had to come home and take us back, well, take the others back. It was my first trip.

PHILLIPS: How many of you?

IFILL: Oh, it was myself, my sister Edna, my sister Inez, my cousin Ebert and my nephew Ernest, five of us. And my mother brought home my youngest sister, was a year old at that time, Elaine. She brought her home with them.

PHILLIPS: And so, and what year was this again?

IFILL: She came home in 1920, and we left in January of 1921.

PHILLIPS: So what was it like leaving Barbados?

IFILL: Well, I remember going to board the ship. And, at that time, it did not have a harbor where you could dock the boats in. Since then they have rectified that. So

you had to get into one of these little rowboats, or whatever you call it. And the ship would be off to, in the middle of the ocean, and then they row you out there and you have to climb aboard on the ship. So that was a terrifying experience to us children because we had never had done anything like that before. So it was, the ship name was the Vestris and I don't know where it had come from before it docked in Barbados, but it was headed for New York, and that's where we went.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember arriving in the harbor in New York?

IFILL: No. That's one thing I don't remember, and I don't know why. I don't know whether it was because it might have been nighttime and it was dark, but I do remember on board the ship. It was the first time I had been on board the ship, and since it was such a hard time for my mother, she sold the property, and she got very little for it, and it was very hard for her to, um, to be able to afford anything no more than third class, down in the steerage. And, um, she didn't have the, I don't think we had the proper clothing, because this was January and this was a warm climate we were leaving, and we all got sick, frostbitten, whatnot. I remember that we were down in the hole and it was like, I don't know how many people down there, and these beds were three tiers high and the sea got kind of roughed and somebody opened a porthole and the water came in and wet all the beds. And I remember one night we went up, we heard this music so we creeped upstairs and went upstairs. People were dancing. I never saw that before in my life, people dancing, and like that, in that kind of a type of a dance. And, um, they were playing, I think it was the Missouri Waltz, anyway. And that was an experience to us. And when we got my, one of, my sister Inez, she became frostbitten. She couldn't, she couldn't walk. It was so cold. And, as I said, we weren't prepared for it. And one of the things that I remember was that before we left Barbados we all had to be inoculated for smallpox. And my vaccination didn't take. So when we got to Ellis Island, I had to be vaccinated again. It still didn't take. (she laughs) When I got ready to go to school, I had to be vaccinated again. What the doctors didn't realize, the reason it didn't take, because I had already had smallpox, and I was immune to it. So all the vaccinations didn't mean anything, but they didn't know that much in those days, so they vaccinated me three times. (she laughs)

PHILLIPS: Tell me what you thought when you saw those people. I imagine they were dressed up in their cocktail clothing. What did you think when you saw that kind of western sophisticated dancing?

IFILL: I didn't know what to make of it because I had no frame to compare it with. We were a simple people, we were religiously inclined, we lived a simple life. We went to bed with the sundown because we didn't have any electricity. In those days we had just what they, the lamps, like similar lamps I got over there, and that was all the light that we had.

PHILLIPS: Oil lamps.

IFILL: Of course. And that's all we had, or candles. And so to see all this, with the bright lights and everything else, was something like, you know, I had no frame of mind to compare it, because it was indeed something foreign. And to see all that many white people at one time, I'd never seen that many in my life at one time, that was also a shock, too. It was like a . . . (break in tape)

PHILLIPS: I'm going to turn this tape over, and we'll go to side two.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

PHILLIPS: This is continuing tape number, interview number 402 [DP-28]. So, we were talking about that experience of the dancing, I suppose. And I guess you described that for us. I mean, was this, I suppose I have to try to understand because an unusual experience, you'd never seen that before. I mean, were you excited by it, surprised by it, revolted by it? Was it against your religious convictions?

IFILL: No, nothing of the sort. The only thing I was afraid of was if my mother would have caught us up there when she had told us to stay downstairs. We weren't allowed up there on that deck, because we were in steerage, and we were not supposed to be on second or first class deck, and we had gone up there. So our only feeling was let's not be caught. (she laughs)

PHILLIPS: Was this because of racial discrimination?

IFILL: No, money. (she laughs) You stayed where you paid for. We were down in this large room, down in the very hold of the ship, and there was several other people in it. We didn't have a private room. And you were in, uh, three layers of beds, one on top of the other. So it was not, uh, there because of choice. We'd just be there because we didn't have the money to go anyplace else.

PHILLIPS: Now, when you got to Ellis Island you said that you didn't really remember arriving there.

IFILL: I didn't remember ever seeing the Statue of Liberty.

PHILLIPS: What do you remember about that?

IFILL: What I remember was that we went in this place and we were herded like we were cattle. I remember that. And we all felt very indignant about the treatment and whatnot. And there were a mass of people. I don't know where they had come from. And we were all in this room and we were like in cages. And, um, there were some of us on one side and some on the other. And I'd seen pictures of it when they did the thing on Ellis Island when they had the, what do you call it?

PHILLIPS: The Bicentennial.

IFILL: The Bicentennial. And I saw the pictures, and that was exactly the way I remembered, just like we were in cages. And we had to be herded there and kept there. And my mother didn't know why we should have been because she had been just gone a few months and my sisters and whatnot, they had all been born in this country. But anyway, they kept them there because of me, I think it was. I wasn't a citizen and, um, and my smallpox hadn't taken, so they kept us there. And it was just one human mass of people. Bewildered, black and white, people who weren't

speaking English, couldn't understand each other, but all afraid of each other. And, um, it was just, to me it was just horrible.

PHILLIPS: You say that it was a horrible experience. You were there amongst people of all different nationalities, languages and races. What was . . .

IFILL: Well, it was, I remember there was a group of Italian people there facing us, and I remember there was one lady from our group who'd come on board ship with us. We met them there. Later on we became friends. And I don't know whether these people were doing anything or not, but you know, people, a stranger in a strange country, they don't understand the language, and maybe they're doing things, and maybe they're not doing things, but they're looking at each other and they're wondering and they're bewildered. And I remember her saying to us, "Well, if they give you the evil eye, you give it back to them." You know? (she laughs) It was so, so weird. I've never forgotten that. She said, "Don't let them give you the evil eye. You give it back to them." It had no bearing at all on anything. I just remembered it.

PHILLIPS: So how long did you stay on Ellis Island?

IFILL: I haven't the faintest idea. I imagine it might have been overnight because, as I said, my vaccination hadn't taken. I wasn't a citizen, although my sisters were. And I think they held us, held us over. And they vaccinated me again. (she laughs)

PHILLIPS: Then you, you saw your, had you seen your parents yet?

IFILL: Well, I was with my mother.

PHILLIPS: Oh, that's right, because she'd come back to get you. Had you seen your father yet?

IFILL: No, no. I didn't see him till we went to where they were living. They were living in the Bronx, and we went there, and that's when I first saw my father. I had never seen him before in my life.

PHILLIPS: What did you think when you first arrived on Manhattan?

IFILL: Well, I know I remember the cold. It was so cold, and I don't think we had the proper clothing, as far as I can remember. And that was my first sensation, of being so cold. And then being bewildered, strange, you know. You're taken out of a setting that you had lived all your life and with certain surroundings, and here you are a foreigners in a foreign land, you know, country.

PHILLIPS: And all of the, the size of the buildings and the crowds, and all of the different people must have left their impression upon you, I would imagine.

IFILL: I don't think that that was, that impressed me. Not the size of the building, although I hadn't seen any large buildings of that height that was in New York. At that time, Manhattan didn't have the skyscrapers that they had in later years. This was 1921. Most of the buildings were five or ten stories high, or something like that. But I don't know why, because that doesn't stand in my mind. I know it was people that I, you know, I was thinking about, and the impression that I remember was just people rather than buildings, or something of that nature.

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PHILLIPS: So you arrived in the Bronx. What was life for you like in the Bronx?

IFILL: Well, it was very strange. We arrived with this accent, it was at the height of the Garvey movement and, um, unfortunately for us, we got there in May and my father got killed . . . We got there in January and my father got killed in May. And immediately that set in motion an entirely different life that we might have had if he had not been killed.

PHILLIPS: How was he killed?

IFILL: He was killed, uh, hit over the head with a baseball bat. He was murdered. He, he had, and his friends, they like to play cricket. And on Sunday they would go to this place in Harlem and would play cricket.

PHILLIPS: Do you know where that was?

IFILL: Oh, yes. 147th Street and Seventh Avenue. At that time it was an empty lot, and it stretches from Seventh Avenue to, um, to Lenox. And, in later years the, um, the Transit Authority built a building on it. And his group was playing cricket. It was a Sunday afternoon. And there must have been another group playing baseball. And there was a man selling bananas. And one of the young men there must have swiped a banana and I guess my father saw him and he must have, you know, spoke to him about it, and they got in an argument and they argued, and then my father went and sat down on the side and the guy came up behind him and hit him over the head with a baseball bat and got three years for it.

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PHILLIPS: And your father died.

IFILL: Of course. He died the same time. So immediately it put us in a different category because what had happened was my father had taken this job, what they call a super, to manage this building, and by managing this building we had an apartment. And after my father died they said my mother couldn't manage the work, and they let her go, so we had no place to go, absolutely no place, no money.

PHILLIPS: So what did you do?

IFILL: Well, my mother gather up our things and we ended up, she had a cousin, I think, another Sobrice, that, um, was managing a building and had a room, a storeroom. And my mother put all our things, and we went to live in this storeroom without the, her cousin, telling the landlord about it. And we were down there I don't know how long and, um, the meters for the apartments were down there, so the guy had to come into the area where we were to read the meters and I think he reported it. So my mother had to find a place for us to stay. So she found one room in Seventh Avenue next door to what became Small Paradise in later years. And it was just like that, going from place to place, trying to find some place to live.

PHILLIPS: What do you mean by Small Paradise?

IFILL: That's a nightclub, a famous nightclub. And we was right in this place that she moved to, moved us in this one room, this rooming house, was next door to this place that became Small Paradise.

PHILLIPS: Was that in, where was this located?

IFILL: Manhattan.

PHILLIPS: Uptown?

IFILL: Yeah. Seventh Avenue. So it was a question, my mother, whatever job she could get, whether it was cleaning houses, or whatever, whatever, laundry, whatever, she would buy the, she would, um, pay for some place, and many nights we went to bed we didn't have enough to eat. We got up and went to school the next day without anything to eat. And this would go on for weeks at times.

PHILLIPS: Where did you go to school?

IFILL: In Manhattan.

PHILLIPS: Tell us about that experience after.

IFILL: Well, it was, we moved from different places because we were always one jump ahead of the landlord, the fact of the money. But, and, when we moved from the Bronx, we moved to Manhattan and, um, my mother was able, at one time, to get an apartment . . .

PHILLIPS: Just let me get that clear. You first were in the Bronx?

IFILL: Yeah. That's when I came, to the Bronx.

PHILLIPS: And then after that you were in Manhattan living on 140 . . .

IFILL: No, that was later. We were living on a hundred and . . . At that time, blacks didn't live up 140-something street. They were confined to the 135th Street or 36th, or downtown. And we were living, um, gee, I can't remember the streets. Anyway, my mother got this apartment there and . . .

PHILLIPS: This is now back in Manhattan.

IFILL: Back in Manhattan, after my father got killed. And, as I said, this was the height of the Garvey Movement. And . . .

PHILLIPS: Just, before, can you explain a little bit about what that felt like? What the political rhetoric, dialogue, was like, the atmosphere, politically? Were you too young, perhaps, or not?

IFILL: It was not very comfortable for us because we had an accent, so the kids in school would make fun of us and call us monkey chasers. And we had to run the gamut of leaving school and getting home on time without getting into a fight.

PHILLIPS: Because Marcus Garvey was a Caribbean?

IFILL: Well, and because of the fact, what, of his movement. His movement was very controversial.

PHILLIPS: Amongst the black people, you mean?

IFILL: Amongst everybody, black and white. Very controversial. And it was, it was really, that was all but, that was, people were talking about at that time was one of the big political issues at that time because he was way ahead of the Civil Rights Movement. This was back in 1921, '22, and the Civil Rights Movement didn't come till about forty years later. And so he was way ahead of it. And so it was a really very emotional time for blacks and whites with the things that he was advocating. One of the things that he was advocating was back to Africa. He brought these ships. I think you know the story of Marcus Garvey, don't you?

PHILLIPS: I know some of it. (Ms. Ifill laughs) I don't know it the way you know it.

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IFILL: Well, incidentally, when his trial was on, my husband's brother defended his co-defendant, and he was the only guy that got off.

PHILLIPS: What was his name?

IFILL: I think his name was Dent. My husband's brother's name was Percy Ifill. He was the lawyer. Anyway . . .

PHILLIPS: Is he still alive?

IFILL: Oh, no. No, no, no. They're all dead.

PHILLIPS: So was there a lot of talk in your family about Garvey and the Movement?

IFILL: Yes, there was. My uncle, my brother's, my mother's brother, but my mother said she couldn't see it because, um, she didn't think that some of the things that he was saying was, you know, right. And she couldn't go alone with it.

PHILLIPS: Like what?

IFILL: About, uh, the separation of the races and so forth and so on. She couldn't go along with it.

PHILLIPS: What did she think?

IFILL: She didn't think that that was right. She just feel that everyone should be considered, you know, one, and so forth and so on. And my husband, he told me later, he said one of the reasons he couldn't join the movement was because of the titles. And he said that's why he left Barbados, because he wanted to get away from the titles. (she laughs) And they had invested each other with all these different titles, so he could never join the Movement.

PHILLIPS: Your husband couldn't get along with the titles within the Movement, the Garvey Movement? You also told me before he left, he didn't like the British system of titles.

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IFILL: Right. He said that was why he left, one of the reasons why he left Barbados, to get away from that, because he feel that everybody should be equal, and he didn't

see that there should be Lord and, and Master, and so forth and so on. And, um, he couldn't, he didn't think that was right.

PHILLIPS: People felt that you were part of the Garvey movement because of your Caribbean accent?

IFILL: No. No, no, no, that wasn't it. It was just the children didn't even know any better. It's just that all kids were more or less would make fun of other children if they're different, without really understanding why they're different, or even knowing why they're mocking them, or anything like that. They're different. And here you are in an area where the accent is southern black, and suddenly you hear this Caribbean thing that you can't understand. And it calls for a lot of ill will and ill feeling.

PHILLIPS: So what was school like for you?

IFILL: School was all right for me. I liked school. I liked to learn. I liked to read, and that was no problem. But I was always sickly, so I missed a lot of days in school. And, um, I had bad eyesight, and my mother couldn't afford to get any glasses for me, and I couldn't see the blackboard, and then be a little bit ashamed to tell the teacher I can't see what you're reading, what you're writing, you know, one of those sort of things. But I liked school.

PHILLIPS: So what, tell us a little bit about that school experience. How long were you there?

IFILL: In school? Well, I went through from the first grade up to the ninth grade there in Manhattan. At that time the schooling was much better than it is today. You selected a particular area where you want to go in. Either what they call commercial or vocational or onto academic or whatever. And I had selected commercial, that I would, um, do bookkeeping and all that kind of stuff. And in those days they gave you a better education. I had two years of French and so forth and so on and whatnot. Kids don't get nothing like that today.

PHILLIPS: Did you find that your education, although you were very young, of course, but what you had had, your education in Barbados, had put you in a good position when you came to the United States?

IFILL: Uh-huh. Because I knew my alphabet, I could read a little. Not too proficient, but I could. And I could spell a little, and I could do a little arithmetic. So I had a, you know, foundation. I should not have been really placed in the first grade because it put me a whole year behind my peers. But the American system is such that they always think that nobody has as good an education as the American system, which is not right, and they always put the kids from the other countries back. And that was a disadvantage for me, because I was a year behind my peer group.

PHILLIPS: It sounds to me like, in fact, you were quite well-schooled in your school in Barbados.

IFILL: Well, like I said, I didn't go regular because of the problems of, the health problem and the money problem and whatnot.

PHILLIPS: So you went through to, did you say, twelfth grade?

IFILL: No.

PHILLIPS: Eighth?

IFILL: Ninth.

PHILLIPS: Ninth.

IFILL: I got what they called in those days two years of high school in the ninth, up to the ninth grade, because the system was entirely different.

PHILLIPS: And what happened after that?

IFILL: What happened after that? I had to go to work. I wanted to be a doctor, but there wasn't, the funds wasn't there to send me on to get my education, so I had to go to work, get a job.

PHILLIPS: What did you do?

IFILL: I went working in a laundry, and I got hurt.

PHILLIPS: Did you get badly hurt?

IFILL: Oh, I broke my toe and the nail, and in those days it was hard for you to lay claim to anything and get truly indeed compensated. There's still this, the system is still rotten when it comes to Workmen's Comp. And, um, anyway it was, it wasn't, uh, that pleasant.

PHILLIPS: So tell us about those early days of work as a young woman living, were you living in Harlem, or . . .

IFILL: Harlem.

PHILLIPS: Still living in Harlem. What was life like in Harlem in those days? Where were you now, the '30s? The Depression.

IFILL: Uh-huh.

IFILL: Probably that's already passed.

IFILL: Late, no, no, late '20s.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Tell us what it was like during those Depression years.

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IFILL: It was hard for everyone. Most people didn't have a job and if they did have a job they, the wages were low, but then the cost of living was low. You could rent a whole apartment for maybe twenty or thirty dollars a week, I mean, a month. And you could take five dollars and go to the store and buy enough groceries for a whole week. So things were even. In fact, they're much better than they are today when you think about the comparison. And, um, it became so bad, the Depression became so bad, that the government had to step in with the New Deal and, you know, find work or General Relief and so forth and so on. So my mother had to apply for help,

and so forth and so on, like everybody else. Because there was just no work, absolutely nothing. But the difference between then and now is that people were more, had more integrity, more honesty. They didn't steal from each other, and all that sort of stuff, you know. It was entirely different, very different. Harlem was a safe place to live in those days.

PHILLIPS: Tell us a little bit about the atmosphere in Harlem.

IFILL: Oh, it was, it was nice.

PHILLIPS: This was well after the Harlem Renaissance, so-called, wasn't it?

IFILL: It was during that particular period, some of it was. But it was entirely different atmosphere than it is today. You, I know as a child I could walk the streets at night, and I did it many times two and three o'clock in the morning going from my sister's house to my own home. Didn't have any fear of anyone molesting me, or anything like it. It was entirely different atmosphere. People didn't have much, but they respected each other and they didn't steal and rob from each other. There wasn't all that crime and stuff going on. And, uh, the, uh, the possibility as a black person going to school and getting an education, and coming out and getting a decent job, was impossible. The teachers would tell us, "Why are you taking this class" in typing or bookkeeping or whatever that I was taking. "You can't get a job when it's all over." That's what the teacher told us. When I say us, I mean blacks like myself.

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PHILLIPS: A white teacher?

IFILL: Yes. And the, um, the Puerto Ricans and the cubans, because I had a mixture of kids in my class. Those were the days when you had Jewish, Irish, Italians, and others living in Harlem. It wasn't just all black. And so my, I came up in an integrated schooling. There was just, at that time, very few blacks in the schools that I went to. They were predominantly White. And, um, but the teachers wouldn't, had no compulsion to tell you, well, "Why are you striving for a good education? You have no way of using this education." And, um, it was very discouraging because you want to get an education, but the doors were closed to you. And you know that after you got the education, you still might not be able to get a job. So that was sort of some of the problems that I found very distressing. It was very discouraging. But it was a fun time for a lot of people. I wasn't given to fun. Not that much anyway. I was more of a serious-minded person, and I liked to read. So my outlet was not parties and whatnot, but I did attend the theaters. They had very good theaters in harlem. The, people only talk about the Apollo, but there was one called the Lafayette, the Al Hambre and whatnot. We had live vaudeville shows and whatnot, and plays, and things like that. And that was the days of the, uh, the original Harlem Globetrotters and it was an entirely different atmosphere. You were living in a city, but yet you were like living in a country, a place a little set off. Because up on 150th Street there they had this hill, and a man up there, they had a casino up there. And a little further down the road from this casino they had a man that was raising goats right in the city of New York. It was a different time. It was a fun time. I mean, for children, I mean, in many respects, because you could play in the streets without worrying. You know, the parents could leave you out at night or in the daytime. Many times it would be hot and we'd stay out till about two or three o'clock in the

morning, just downstairs playing among ourselves and what, with no fear of being molested or any harm coming to us. And that's, all that's gone.

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PHILLIPS: Did you go to Central Park?

IFILL: Oh, yeah. But I lived near other parks. I lived near Mt. Morris Park, I lived near a park up the hill where they call it Sugar Hill, and the different other parks. And so you'd go to those parks with no fear.

PHILLIPS: What was the name of that hill?

IFILL: Sugar Hill.

PHILLIPS: Sugar Hill.

IFILL: It wasn't really Sugar Hill, but they called it that because it was on the hill, and that's where some of the blacks, entertainers and the more wealthy people, lived.

PHILLIPS: What sort of books did you like to read?

IFILL: I started out with comics. I still read the comics today. (she laughs) I read all the, uh, the fairy tales that was ever written, I think, by Hans Anderson. And then, from there, I graduated to the, uh, adventure stories. And then I read all the girls' books, Elsie Disenmore and all the others, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm and all those other books that you have for children. All the boys books. And then I got into, uh, Tarzan and Zane Grey and all those ones that wrote, you know, adventure stories for children and whatnot.

PHILLIPS: So when did you meet your husband?

IFILL: Well, my husband knew my parents because we were all from the same place. So I didn't meet him till we were living in the same house. (voices garbled)

PHILLIPS: I mean, what I'm trying to get a sense of now, your work and your husband. You must, so you started talking about your husband. You said you were all from the same place.

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IFILL: Yeah. And he knew my parents before I was born, so it was just a question that we happened to move into the same apartment where they were living, and that's how I met him.

PHILLIPS: So you got married in the United States, obviously.

IFILL: Oh, yes.

PHILLIPS: And your work? What work were you doing then? What work did you get, eventually?

IFILL: Well, I went from, after the war, before the war, I decided that I was going to get training and get off the welfare system. So I went and took a class in sewing. I learned to be a sewing operator, machine operator, they call it. And that was one of

the first jobs that I had, and the war broke out at that time. And my oldest daughter, I have four children, by the way, and five grands and one great-grand. And, uh, she developed rheumatic fever, and that's how I came to California. And, um, I got this training running a, sewing machine operator. And I did that for a while, and then later on I didn't do that. And now what I'm doing is I'm running a credit union. I'm right back to square one, where the teacher said you couldn't do bookkeeping and typing and so forth and so on. That's what I'm doing now. I'm managing a credit union.

PHILLIPS: How long have you been doing that?

IFILL: Well, my husband started this credit union thirty-four years ago.

PHILLIPS: Tell us a little bit about that.

IFILL: Well, my husband was always one to start things and keep things moving and whatnot and he believed in black pride and what not, and so forth and so on. Because he told me that one of the things that they worked on was the treatment of blacks at Ellis Island. that he got a group together and they wrote the governor of New York at the time and, uh, and had them change the way they treated the blacks that came in. (she laughs) At Ellis Island. And there was two treatments . . .

PHILLIPS: So there was discrimination at Ellis Island, you're saying.

IFILL: Exactly.

PHILLIPS: Who did he write to? Which governor?

IFILL: I don't remember.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what date this was, what period? Roughly?

IFILL: No, no. It would have to be somewhere in the, I'd be just guessing, around the '30s or '40s.

PHILLIPS: So he, he got interested in that specific issue, or was that . . .

IFILL: Well, he was always interest in certain issues, anything that dealt with black pride. Because, um, he followed the Garvey movement, he followed Du Bois. And some others, Trotter and different other ones that I don't know anything about. He knew about them. And, uh, he followed all those men and he was conversant with their achievements long before the Civil Rights issue became what it was in the '60s.

PHILLIPS: So he was really an active participant in . . .

IFILL: In certain things, right. And the group that he was with. You see, in those days . . .

PHILLIPS: What was the group?

IFILL: I don't remember. He sat here and told us all that one time, and I never thought to tape it. I think I've got it on tape somewhere because shortly before he died, he died in '76, the, he was honored by a group, and we did tape all that, so it should be around here on tape someplace.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember the name of the group?

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IFILL: That honored him?

PHILLIPS: Yeah.

IFILL: It was, uh, I think it was OCAPS, but I'm not positive now. Anyway, they had a banquet, and they honored certain ones, and my husband was one of those that they honored.

PHILLIPS: What's the name of the credit union that your husband . . .

IFILL: Caribbean-American Credit Union.

PHILLIPS: And where was that? What's the address of that?

IFILL: It's 2200 South Hobart. It started in my home and, um, in 1954 my husband started to get it together.

PHILLIPS: How do you spell Hobart?

IFILL: H-O-B-A-R-T.

PHILLIPS: That's still the address of it?

IFILL: No. Originally it started in my home, 1860 West 21st Street. And right now 1860 doesn't exist. The freeway runs right there. (she laughs) So he started a credit union. And, um, we were chartered in March of 1955, so we're in our 35th year, going into our 35th year.

PHILLIPS: Why did he start the union?

IFILL: Because when he came here, when he came to Los Angeles, he realized the need. See, in those days, the average black, especially if you came from the caribbeans, they didn't have credit. And this town is built on credit. And, um, if they did go to any of the loan places to get credit, the loan financial institutions, banks would discriminate against them because they were blacks and they were foreigners and they had no credit. And the financial companies would take advantage of them and lend them at high rate of usury. And so my husband started the credit union. He heard about it one day on the radio, and he got going with it.

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END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

PHILLIPS: This is, uh, we're continuing the interview with Vera Clark Ifill. This is interview number 402. Um, this is tape number, I'm sorry, this is number 402 [DP-28], tape two of two, side A. And it's recorded in her home on the 23rd of May 1989. We're continuing this conversation about the, what is the name of the credit union?

IFILL: Caribbean-American Credit Union.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Could you tell us, what we're talking about, that we talked about where it was established. Um, tell us more about why your husband started the Credit Union.

IFILL: Well, he started it because when he came to Los Angeles, he found out that the, the average black could not get credit at the same rates that the whites would get them.

PHILLIPS: Yes. And what year was this, again?

IFILL: 1954. And he decided to start the Credit Union. And at that time the interest, some of the lending rates were as high as 25 percent, while the bank might have been three or four or five percent. So he started the Credit Union. And, um, that was the beginning of that. So we're now in our 34th year.

PHILLIPS: What was his experience to enable him to do that?

IFILL: Well, my husband was a printer, as I told you previously. And, at that time he started the Credit Union, he was still working. Then he had a heart attack and he had to, uh, to resign. And in the meantime, the Credit Union was going. I was home during the day, so I would do whatever was necessary, and he would take it over. He had no previous experience, but the credit union movement is such that they can send someone out to assist you when you, you know, initially getting started and, um, start you on the right path, and that's it. So he just learned, and I learned.

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PHILLIPS: Did you help keep the books?

IFILL: Yep, for a time.

PHILLIPS: How popular was it?

IFILL: You mean the Credit Union?

PHILLIPS: Tell me how it grew.

IFILL: Well, we started out initially, we got our charter, we only had fifty members. Today we have under seven hundred. And, um, we started out with less than a thousand dollars. Today we're almost at half a million. But I'm tired now, and I want to retire, so I'm looking to make certain changes after thirty-four, thirty-five years. I want to get on with my life and do some other things. (she laughs) I like to travel, and there's certain places I like to visit, and I can't do it with the Credit Union.

PHILLIPS: Sounds like the Credit Union to me was a very important thing to have done, a very radical act to have taken on behalf of people who were having great difficulties getting loans at the time. Did you, was it well-publicized? Were the media interested? Were there problems? I mean, what was the atmosphere against which this undertaking was set?

IFILL: There were, as far as the media was concerned, when they had the Watts riots and my husband called them and asked the Times to come out and interview us, to show that there weren't everything bad in the black community and that there were people in the black community who were trying to help the black community long before the riots. They wouldn't even come. So we've never got any help, outside

help, from anyone. It was primarily formed by the people, and we've always existed under those conditions.

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PHILLIPS: Did you, were you involved actively in political activities, in the Civil Rights Movement, for instance?

IFILL: No. My husband was, in New York he was involved in political things, but I never have been, for different reasons. Religious reasons is one.

PHILLIPS: During the Martin Luther King years?

IFILL: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Is there anything else that we should talk about in this context?

IFILL: You mean about the Credit Union?

PHILLIPS: Yeah, or about other things. I mean, I don't know what else to ask you at this point.

IFILL: Well . . .

PHILLIPS: It sounds to me like the Credit Union is quite a story.

PHILLIPS: It is a story by itself. Uh, well, I think my children is of interest. I wouldn't mind mentioning them. My oldest son, he works as a professor in the University of Michigan, and he lives there. They were here for my birthday.

PHILLIPS: What's his name?

IFILL: Don Ifill. Dr. Don Ifill.

PHILLIPS: What's his discipline?

IFILL: He's social work, okay, mental health. And, um, my daughter, Ala, she's a realtor. And my other son, he's a banker in Minnesota, where he's in the banking. And my youngest daughter, she works at the El Camino college as a cashier. And I have some grandchildren, great-grands. Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Anything else that we should mention?

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IFILL: Well, I would like to, I have as my houseguests some people from India. I don't think the American people are aware that the Sikhs are being persecuted in India. Would that fit in this framework? I don't think so.

PHILLIPS: It's really about Ellis Island, about your own experience, although it's interesting to know that you, why do you feel this compassion for these people, or do you feel . . .

IFILL: Well, I feel that their story is not being publicized in what is happening to them. I have here in my home people who are Sikhs, and they are experiencing a lot of turmoil in their country and the average person is not aware what's going on.

They're being killed and everything else. I mean, it's a political issue. I know that it's a very painful one, and that people are not aware of it.

PHILLIPS: Is there anything else specific to your own life and experience on Ellis Island that you'd like to mention before you finish?

IFILL: Well, there are some other things, but I don't think they're really important, you know. Children things, how we played, and the things that we did as children.

PHILLIPS: Tell me, briefly.

IFILL: (she laughs) Well, on Halloween, for instance, we used to put flour in the sack and hit each other, or stop the buses and all that sort of little games that we played. These sorts of things.

PHILLIPS: This was in the Bronx?

IFILL: No, in Manhattan.

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PHILLIPS: In Manhattan.

IFILL: In Manhattan, yeah. That sort of thing. It was a fun time.

PHILLIPS: Tell me about the fun times.

IFILL: (she laughs) Well, those were fun times to us, you know, doing things like that, you know.

PHILLIPS: What do you mean stopped the buses?

IFILL: Well, they were the double-decker buses that used to run down Seventh Avenue. We'd go out there and stop them. We'd know we weren't going anywhere and we weren't getting on them. And then we would just run away, or we would go and ring people's doorbell and, you know, those things like that that kids do that's a little crazy. (she laughs) I had a lot of fun doing that. When we'd go up on the roof and play up on the roof. You know, we could see Yankee Stadium from the roof where we lived there one time. You could watch some of the ballgame free. (she laughs) Oh, gosh. It was fun time.

PHILLIPS: Okay, I think that just wraps . . .

IFILL: That about does it.

PHILLIPS: Okay. That wraps up our interview with Vera Clark Ifill. It's interview number 402 [DP-28], tape number two of two. It's now about twenty minutes to eight o'clock.

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